



CLAYTON
STONE,
Facing Off

ENA JONES



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For Jeff, always



MONDAY, MAY 7, 8:35 a.m.

1

The back of Kyle Hampton's head pushes hard against my mouth, and I realize this is probably not how we should have been introduced.

Yup. My assignment is going really well. I've just tackled the president's kid and shoved him into a toilet stall. As in, the son of the president of the United States. As in, a *toilet* stall.

I didn't have a choice! I've been a student at the Sydney Brown Middle School less than fourteen minutes; the door with the FACULTY BATHROOM sign was the only logical option. Where the heck else could I hole up with him?

It's practically impossible to get my SpiPhone and keep hold of Kyle—Captain Thompson did warn me this job might get complicated—and now it sounds like a sledgehammer is coming through the bathroom door. I need help, preferably within the next thirty seconds.

How did I get into this mess, just when I thought life had returned to normal?

It started with an abrupt knock on my thigh—the Special Service version of a text.



FRIDAY, MAY 4, 12:05 P.M.—2 DAYS, 20 HOURS
AND 30 MINUTES EARLIER

2

Friday, just before noon—

I'm sucking down the usual sausage pizza, fruit mish-mash and chocolate milk, trading play-off talk with my lacrosse teammates. We're scattered across two side-by-side tables in the back of Masters Academy cafeteria.

The final game of the season is next Wednesday, when we go against the number one team in our division: Sydney Brown. Percy saw their last game and came back with a full report. He said they're good, but the worst news is they've got a maniac on their team, number 23, who's famous for sending guys to the sidelines and, apparently, one time to the hospital.

It'll be tough, but if we win against SB, we're practically guaranteed a spot in the second round of regional play-offs. If we lose, it's a shot in the dark.

The entire team's agreed that there's only one thing to do: win.

My best friend, Toby, is inhaling a hot dog while I relax into another bite of pizza. My eyes drift to the next table and I notice Laci Peters smiling at me. I smile back,

because we're sort of friends now. Plus, Toby has a serious thing for her.

Besides the new SpiPhone in my pocket and my weird friendship with Laci, life is pretty much back to normal. It definitely wasn't normal a few weeks ago when I helped the Special Service capture a ring of kidnappers who targeted malls; now they're all in jail waiting for their big trial.

Except for the short patches of hair sprouting from my teammates' heads—which they shaved to protect *me*—it's like the whole mall napper thing never happened. Not one of them has mentioned it. Every so often, one of the guys rubs his fuzz-top and grins. But that's it. They know my identity has to remain secret—top secret—if I'm gonna keep helping the Special Service. And that's what I call true brothers. I've got twenty-four of them.

I've wondered when the Special Service will need me again, so when my SpiPhone knocks like a gavel against my leg, a tingle runs up my spine. I reach into my pocket and clasp the phone, hoping I'm not imagining things. It thumps again, and I bite down my grin. I gotta go read whatever text just showed up—in private.

Headmistress Templeton and Captain Thompson agreed, after Gran bullied them into it, that I should have custody of my Special Service SpiPhone full-time. It's kind of cool because Agent Jones worked some of his technology magic and now the phone has two numbers: my old “regular” number, and my new Special Service number. He even trained me to recognize the coded rings and vibrations so I immediately know which number is being used and how quickly I need to grab a hall pass.

“Where ya going, Clayton?” says Toby, his eyes alert as he watches me straddle the bench and pick up my tray.

The words aren’t out of Toby’s mouth before I’ve got ten sets of eyes pretending not to care about me ducking out with half-eaten pizza on my plate—something I’ve done, uh, *never*.

Until now.

I return Toby’s gaze and shrug. “When ya gotta go, ya gotta go” is all I can think to say.

And then I about-face and head to the cafeteria doors, knowing he won’t keep asking this time. I grab the Spi-Phone from my pocket as I hit the hallway and jog to the nearest stairwell. Looking both ways, I slip behind the stairs and stand in the light of the window. I type the first password and then press my thumb to the screen to make it through the next security wall. Finally, the Special Service icons pop up.

The text widget is flashing the number 2, but considering I’ve never received a text on this side of the “wall,” I’m not sure that’s normal.

I press it, and the messages appear. They’re from my grandmother.

Liza Stone

Today 12:07 PM

Go to front of M Academy ASAP.

Cpt is waiting.

Leave? Without telling anybody? In the middle of a school day? Can I *do* that?

I reread Gran’s texts: **ASAP. Waiting.**

I think that means *N-O-W*.

My phone reads 12:10 p.m., only a few minutes before the bell rings and lunch is over. Maybe I should wait so

I can get lost in the crowded halls as I sneak out. I look down at the messages again.

They're gone.

I press at the screen, but it's no use. The texts aren't there anymore.

I poke my head into the hallway and look both ways. Some kid is at his locker, too far away for me to tell who it is.

The heck with it. I sprint down the hall about twenty yards, around the corner, another fifteen strides and through the main atrium and out the heavy door that leads outside. I know the security cameras will catch me, but maybe I'll luck out and nobody will be paying attention. The school secretary has to eat, too, and she's the one who usually monitors the entrance.

My feet carry me down the steps, and I register the screech of fast tires turning the corner a block away. There's a gleaming black Suburban speeding toward me. It comes to a perfectly timed stop at the precise moment my shoe touches the curb, and the back door pops open.

Gran has always warned me not to get into a car with strangers, but I don't check before I hop inside. I close the door, grab the seat belt and make myself comfortable.

Up front, a suit is driving. I turn to Captain Thompson, who's staring at me from the next seat over, his arm still in a sling.

My fault.

"I want you to know I threw away a perfectly good piece of pizza for you."

His response is trigger quick. "Don't worry, Clayton. Plenty of pizza to come. As of this weekend, you're moving in with me—and I don't cook."



FRIDAY, MAY 4, 12:36 P.M.

3

I've got a gazillion questions, but Captain Thompson's been on his cell phone since the second he told me I'm gonna be living with him, so I've only gotten one answer: his forehead squeeze that says *Not now*.

After a twelve-minute drive the suit stops the Suburban deep inside the parking garage of the Special Service building. We step out of the SUV into the shadows, and the captain takes three strides to a solid gray door, where he presses his finger to a barely visible piece of metal. The door unlocks with a series of clicks, and we enter through a hallway. We reach the main area, which is airplane-hangar huge. It's lined with computer panels and screens on one level, and floor-to-ceiling maps of the United States and the rest of the world that flash information like current weather and air traffic on the next. Higher still, there are ginormous flat-screens set to news channels all over the world.

I'm still in awe of the place, and as I scan the enormous room the flashbacks kick in: ducking out of school after Laci told me her friend Amber Meldon was in trouble;

convincing Carlos to help me; failing to convince Gran's assistant, Frankie, to help me; ~~stealing~~ borrowing a Special Service car and driving it to the mall nappers' house.

It was Friday, April thirteenth. My thirteenth birthday. The day I got kidnapped on purpose so I could help Amber and her mom escape from the mall nappers—who were going to murder them.

I follow Captain Thompson through the hub of Special Service headquarters and wonder what kind of trouble I'm going to get myself into this time. It's killing me not to ask.

As we cross the main office area, I notice that the wall to Gran's office is open. Up until a few weeks ago, I thought the only thing different about my grandmother was that she owns Big Stone's Diner and loves pickles as much as my grandfather hated them—when he was alive.

We enter her office and I sit where the captain points, at the slick black conference table, and look around. The glossy photos, Gran's supersized desk, the American flag. It's still hard for me to believe she's in charge of all this: *Chief* Liza Stone, Head of the Special Service. There's a stack of files on her desk and, on the floor beside it, a couple of suitcases and my backpack, computer bag and lacrosse gear.

So the move is happening now. As in, right now.

Captain Thompson finally pokes the screen on his phone and awkwardly returns it to his holster. Even though he's right-handed and the sling holds his left arm, I guess it's difficult to do stuff with one hand. As he fumbles, his suit jacket is pushed back and I see the strap for another holster—and his gun.

I wonder how hard it will be for him if he needs to use *that*.

Another reminder: my fault.

I'm opening my mouth to speak when Gran comes whisking into the room from the back corridor. She's got a black duffel bag strapped over her shoulder and is wheeling a small suitcase. Her smile is aimed straight at me until she notices Captain Thompson.

"Oh, good! You're back," she says, immediately changing direction. She hands the bag to the captain.

He takes it and hoists it up and down, testing its weight. "What's this?"

"A few gadgets for my amusement, and one or two things for Clayton." Then she gestures to a laptop sitting open on the conference table. "Have you got everything else ready?"

I'm about to ask *What gadgets?* but it's too late. They've already rolled into an intense, eyeball-to-eyeball discussion about the "cover" house: the security regimen, whether they should install more cameras, potential defense strategies and when it was last swept for bugs and other devices. "That house needs to be secure, top to bottom," says Gran. She points to her suitcase. "I've decided you and Clayton need a maid. You have no idea how difficult it is to keep up with the laundry of an athletic young man."

Captain Thompson laughs. "When was the last time you did laundry? I'll take fine care of Clayton."

"Maybe," Gran says with a small shrug. "But he's my only grandson, and if he's there, I'm there."

Captain Thompson is silent for a moment before he folds. "Okay, Liza. You win."

There's only one way they're going to include me in this conversation, so I dive in headfirst. "Anybody planning to

tell me what's going on? I'm missing a very important pre-algebra class, ya know. There's a test Monday."

Both heads snap in my direction.

"Oh, Clayton!" says Gran, holding out her arms and coming in for a hug. "I'm sorry. Usually I don't get so deeply involved in setting up a cover house. But since my favorite grandson will be living there, I want to personally make sure everything is in order."

I skip the usual reminder that I'm her *only* grandson. "So you're not talking about Captain T's house?"

"No." She sits beside me at the conference table and points to the pile of files on her desk. "Derek, will you bring those over so we can explain matters to Clayton?"

Finally. "Did something happen?"

Captain Thompson sits across from us, keeps two folders and pushes the rest across the table to Gran—with his good hand. "Okay, Clayton," he says. "Let's start with the basics."

The captain opens the top file and shows me a picture of a boy my age. I recognize him immediately. Anybody would; it's Kyle Hampton, the son of President Hampton, the second African-American president in the history of the United States.

I lean in, my heart pumping a little faster, remembering when Amber, Senator Meldon's stepdaughter, was kidnapped by the mall nappers. "Is he missing?"

Gran sighs. "Oh, no, dear. Not at all."

Captain Thompson's expression is grim. "But we want to make sure it stays that way. Your grandmother received a call from the president, requesting our assistance. Or, rather, *yours*."

“Mine?”

Both the captain and Gran nod as Gran begins to explain. “Kyle goes to a private school that is, for the most part, one of the most secure campuses in the United States. Several students have their own security personnel, although they aren’t as hands-on as Kyle’s bodyguards. Despite all the highly trained agents hanging about, Sydney Brown has a problem.”

Captain Thompson opens the next file. “This week the school became aware of a computer breach. Hackers stole all the staff, parent and student files, which included home addresses, Social Security numbers and other personal information.”

“What does that have to do with Kyle?”

“Nothing, we hope,” says Gran. “But we’ve been alerted to some strange online posts naming Sydney Brown as a target. To make matters worse, there were two recent attempts to bypass school security using the back way, through the woods. Both trespassers claimed they’d lost their way, and one of them was walking a dog, so it’s feasible; however, all of this together creates significant concern.”

“You’re afraid somebody’s trying to get to him?”

The captain shrugs. “We’re looking into every possibility. There was a lockdown at the school last week because of a mysterious package, and the bomb squad was called. Because of the risk, any unknown package at the school is treated as a threat.” He looks at Gran before turning back to me. “There’s another small issue. Apparently, Kyle has been acting unusual lately. Quieter, not sharing as much around the dinner table, that sort of thing. The president

is worried that something is bothering his son but can't figure out what it could be."

"Has anybody asked Kyle?"

Captain Thompson nods. "Kyle insists nothing is wrong."

Gran taps one of the folders in front of her. "The president has ordered a full investigation at every level. However, there is a gap in the plan, and he's come up with an interesting way to fill it."

Captain Thompson leans forward. "President Hampton's idea is to assign an undercover agent—apart from his regular bodyguards—to stay close to Kyle, even when he's playing sports. This person would covertly befriend and keep track of him." The corner of his mouth turns up, and there's a mischievous light in his eyes as he adds, "Not many people I know could pull that off."

He's right about that.

Oh. Duh. "So—me."

Gran nods. "You impressed the president with your work on the mall nappers case, Clayton, especially the way you helped bring them in." She squeezes my shoulder and our eyes meet. "So he's asked that you enroll at Kyle's school and work undercover, to help protect his son. Hopefully you can figure out why Kyle is acting different lately."

"I'm supposed to go undercover as his friend?" I look over at my stuff piled next to Gran's desk. "It doesn't sound like you're asking me if I want to do this."

No answer.

I try really hard to hold back my groan. "Our last game is Wednesday, and then play-offs start. We may only be

in middle school, but do you know how many high school and college coaches watch the final play-off teams? And we could win the title this year.”

Captain Thompson grimaces. “I’m glad you brought that up. There’s one more thing.”

Really? This should be good.

“Since Kyle plays lacrosse, you’re going to be playing for Sydney Brown.”

O.M.G. How did that not-so-little detail fly over my head? Sydney Brown. *Sydney Brown*.

I feel my forehead hit the table, but I’m not sure how it got there.

Dear God, please don’t let this happen.

There’s a hand on my shoulder. “Clayton? Are you all right?”

I lift my head and look into my grandmother’s eyes. “No. Sydney Brown is the team we play on Wednesday. Tell me how I’m supposed to play against my own team in the most important game of the year. The guys will never forgive me.”

Gran’s lips are thin and pressed tight as she stares back at me. “We’ll figure that out when the time comes,” she says after way too long a pause. “For now, you need to get as close to Kyle as you can. If he’s at lacrosse practice, you’ll be there, too. If he joins the glee club, start humming, because you’ll be in the row behind him. By lunch on Monday, you’re going to be the best friend he never knew he didn’t have.”

This time I don’t stop the groan. It blows out of my mouth so hard I swear it makes the American flag in the corner sway.

Captain Thompson sends me a stern look. “Clayton, this is important. Are you in?”

“Yeah, right. Have *you* ever figured out how to say no to POTUS?”

Gran laughs in her most unfunny way. “I’m glad you realize what we’re up against.”

“But you *do* have a choice,” says Captain Thompson. “And it’s about your attitude. Imagine if your coach sent a player onto the field when they didn’t want to play.”

Exactly.

My insides are going all wackadoo. I swear, I get what the captain’s saying. But that doesn’t make it any easier to say yes, even when the president is the one calling the shots.

I guess that’s the point. The president is calling the shots.

I take a deep breath. “I’ll do it.”

The captain arches an eyebrow. “One hundred percent?”

I face him, my eyes drawn to his arm, with his fingers dangling out the end of the sling. I know what he’s asking.

“Yeah,” I say. “A hundred percent.”



SUNDAY, MAY 6, 3:00 P.M.

4

It's the longest weekend of my life. The Special Service doesn't just rebuild me on the outside, there are three huge binders of background information to memorize while they poke, pull and prod my face. There's even a coach to teach me a new way to walk and talk.

Agent Brick and I have gotten to be good friends. Not.

She tests me every time I make it through a section in the binders. Family history, maps of the school and DC area, teachers and students—and tons of weird stuff. Like, what *not* to say. I don't know how many times I almost fall asleep answering her questions. Nobody should study so hard on a weekend, especially not me.

Then there's Gran's black duffel bag. Other than a couple of snazzy bow ties that must have belonged to my grandfather, there are no cool gadgets for me. No stun pens or sedative sticks, and definitely not her miniature cannon or the superclassified drone.

Jeez. Don't undercover agents need stuff? I start to grumble, but then I come right out and ask. "Not even a stun pen? I'll keep it turned off."

“No,” she says as she lifts her skirt and secures a laser gun in a holster above her knee. “Not this time.”

“Why not?”

“Clayton, you are going to a school. Absolutely no weapons; *nothing* that could identify you as anything other than a typical student.”

“What about Kyle’s bodyguards? They have weapons.”

“That’s different.”

“Aren’t I supposed to protect Kyle?”

“Not like that,” she says in a disapproving tone.

There’s no use arguing with her, but I honestly think a stun pen might come in handy at a school. She’s forgetting one very important fact: it’s a *pen*.

“Oh, Clayton,” she says with a chuckle, “don’t look so downhearted.” She digs in her bag and hands me a small padded pouch. “Here are a couple of video cameras we’re testing out. They work with an app that’s already been loaded on your phone. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find a use for them.”

I lift the practically weightless pouch. “Thanks,” I say, totally not feeling the love.

“One more thing, and it’s vital,” she says. “After much deliberation, the president has decided not to tell Kyle’s security detail about you. He thinks doing so would jeopardize the entire effort, and perhaps future assignments.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Gran interrupts straight-away. “I know, this may put you in a more challenging position if there is a crisis. But the president is in charge. His son, his decision.”

No pen, and no backup; practically naked. At least I get to keep my SpiPhone.

By the time Monday morning arrives, my brain needs a break and the trip to Sydney Brown Middle School feels like a vacation. For a whole ten minutes I'm by myself in a Mercedes stretch limo.

I flip open the megasized vanity mirror and stare hard at the prepped-out brainy kid who meets my eyes, searching for something recognizable. I finally decide on my teeth. They've inserted a temporary implant inside my nose to make it wider, weaved wavy pieces into my dyed hair, and put chocolate-brown contact lenses in my eyes. Add the mandatory yet oh-so-fashionable bow tie, oxford shirt and khakis, and say hello to Max Carrington—the new me.

My look today is also parentless, supposedly like so many other Sydney Brown kids. My “father,” Captain Thompson going by the name Mitchell Carrington, is a political consultant, and he's too busy to escort me. My mom died of cancer two years ago, something nobody is supposed to talk about because it upsets me. I don't have to fake that. My real mom is dead, and it *does* upset me. My real dad, too. And Gramps. It's not fair and I hate everything to do with death, and not only do I not want to talk about it, I for sure don't want to think about it.

I stare out the window and concentrate hard on the security gatehouse we've stopped at. The guard might look official, but with only a walkie-talkie strapped to his belt, how serious can he be?

The guard gets us checked in, and the bright yellow arm that separates Sydney Brown from the rest of the world rises and lets us continue up the long drive to the school's horseshoe entrance.

We're kind of late, and the driver, a real Special Ser-

vice agent, puts the Mercedes in park and gets out. From behind his sunglasses he casts a casual glance around us, probably noticing every detail. He moves like a mountain lion around the car, and I can tell he's ready to spring in any direction, even slide under the limo, with almost no warning. He's ready for the unexpected—he *expects* the unexpected. That's the type of agent I want to be someday.

He opens the trunk, and I hear him shuffle things around as he gets my backpack and lacrosse bag. I've been instructed to stay put until he opens the door for me.

When he does, I see myself in the reflection of his shades as he hands me my stuff. There's a quick "Good luck, kid" from the side of his mouth as I take my first steps toward the school, but when I turn to respond he's already ducked inside the limo.

I hurry up the walkway to find the main office. I think back to one of the building maps Agent Brick gave me, but then see a sign that says ADMINISTRATION, complete with an arrow pointing the way.

I enter the office and come face-to-face with a lady sitting at a desk. She's busy telling a man in a Comcast uniform that she needs him to get the Internet problems fixed for good this time. From what Gran says, they've run new background checks on every single employee or serviceperson who sets foot on school property, just to be safe. But I look them both over anyway. I *am* working undercover.

The lady immediately stands and smiles when she sees me. "You must be Max," she says, walking around the desk and the cable guy to greet me. "We don't usually get new students toward the end of the year, but we're glad to have you at Sydney Brown."

I put out my hand and we shake. “Good to be here.”

“Your father called to say you’d be late, but don’t worry. It’s a little crazy around here this morning. Our computer system is down again.” She turns to the cable man and asks, “Do you know where you’re going?” But he’s not listening to her. He’s staring at me from underneath his wide-brimmed Comcast cap.

“New, huh?” he says. “That’s tough at your age. Where’d you come from?”

It takes a second for me to remember. “Uh, a town outside Chicago.”

The lady walks to the door and opens it. “We really need our system up and running.”

The man winks at me, then nods and tugs at the brim of his cap as he walks out the door. “No worries, you’ll be back online in a heartbeat,” he says. “I’m the best around.”

She exhales loudly as the door closes behind him, like she’s glad he’s gone. Then she returns to her desk, picks up a manila envelope and hands it to me. “This is your schedule, your locker number and a map of the school.” I put down my lacrosse gear and start to open the envelope, but she bends down to pick up a black nylon bag beside her desk and hands that to me, too. “This is your tablet. It has most of your class texts, teacher websites—practically everything—loaded on it. And if that gentleman can get us back online for more than five minutes, you’ll find it very useful.”

“Thanks,” I say, throwing the computer bag’s strap over my shoulder.

Her hand is out again. “And here’s your student ID. We used your application photo, but it’s easy to change if you’d

like. You'll need it for any purchases on campus and to get into school events." She glances to her right and frowns before returning her attention to me. "I know you're supposed to meet Headmistress Williams, but something has come up, and I'm afraid that won't be possible this morning. I'm sure she'll catch up with you as soon as she can."

I look at the closed door only a few feet away. There's a gold nameplate that says HEADMISTRESS GERALDINE WILLIAMS.

Next thing I know, the secretary's heading past me into the hallway. I pick up my gear and catch up just as she points down the hall. "Take the first left, then right, and then left again. Your locker will be on the left. And your first class, which has already begun, is a little farther up the same hallway. Any questions?"

Yeah. Can I skip my first class?

"No, thanks. I'll be okay."

"Great. Have a good day. I'll try to check in with you later."

I glance back at the nameplate on her desk, kicking myself for not noticing earlier. "Thanks, Ms. Hernandez."

She pats me on the back, and this time her smile seems brighter. "You're welcome, Max."

I tuck my student ID into my pocket and pad down the carpeted hallway, trying not to rock my shoulders when I walk, something I never realized I did before I had five agents staring me down, pointing out everything from the way I raise my right eyebrow when I ask a question, to the way it sounds like "bull" when I say "bowl," and apparently the unique way I lumber as I travel from Point A to Point Z.

The carpet makes it feel like I'm in some sort of hotel,

not a school. I turn left, passing classroom doors every twenty feet or so, and then right. Tall, wide lockers that alternate the school colors, black and gold, run the length of this hallway. Pretty cool.

By the time I turn again, starting to count down the numbers to my locker, I'm loving the feel of this place. There are nooks with couches and reclining chairs that look comfortable enough to sleep on, and charging stations like you see in some airports. Instead of regular water fountains, there are water coolers with big jugs, and spigots for cold and hot water, and I swear I smell coffee beans, as if there's a Starbucks around the corner.

Oh, yeah. No matter what this school looks like, it stinks because Toby's not here. And neither is the mocha he usually brings me from his father's coffee shop.

I stare up at my locker, 1115, and pull the paper Ms. Hernandez gave me out of my pocket. I'm guessing all I'll need is the envelope and the leather bag with my new tablet, so I put the rest inside my locker, which is so big there's even room for my lacrosse gear.

I stare at my schedule, knowing I'll probably be walking into the middle of the teacher's lecture, the worst possible way for a new kid to make an entrance. Plus, Kyle will be there.

I turn and start in the direction of my highly anticipated Advanced World History class. For half a second I consider staking out Kyle's locker—it's across the hall and down a few—but then two things happen simultaneously.

#1: A giant man in the standard dark-suit-and-earpiece getup comes whizzing around the corner, his eyes on full

alert. #2: The emergency lights start flashing along with a pulsing, high-pitched tone.

The man positions himself directly in front of the set of lockers where Kyle's should be, as kids begin pouring into the hallway. I look him up and down and then I see it, on the floor, between the agent's feet. A sealed brown package, about the size of a large shoe box. And the way the agent is standing over it, he definitely doesn't want anybody near it.

Could it be a—

Holy mother of ticking time bombs. *Now?*

Kids are scrambling all around me. A voice comes through the speakers, breaking into the shrill alarm: "Code Number Two Lockdown! Go immediately to your assigned safe zone!"

I don't know what a Code Number Two Lockdown is, but from the way people are moving, and the look of the agent towering over that mystery box, I have a pretty good guess.

The captain says the point of all this security is to protect Kyle a hundred percent, even if the risk turns out to be zero, because there are no do-overs, something Kyle probably doesn't understand. Can't blame him, though. Until recently, I didn't, either.

There's only one thing to do: find Kyle Hampton and keep him the heck away from here—until this lockdown is over.